

THE PARENTS' REVIEW

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE
FOR PARENTS AND TEACHERS.

Vol. XVII. No. 1.]

[JANUARY, 1906.]

THE PLACE OF GREEK IN MODERN EDUCATION.

BY OSCAR BROWNING.

IN the discussion of the question implied in the title of this paper two admissions may be made at once: first, that of the many schoolboys who learn Greek few ever get far enough to derive any real benefit from the study; and, secondly, that the amount of Greek required for passing the Little-go at Cambridge (for it has not been proposed to abolish the language for the pass degree) is very small, and may be acquired by a moderate amount of labour in about six months. Also, a good deal of evidence may be adduced to show that those who have thus studied Greek under compulsion have expressed their gratitude for having been obliged to do so. It is more profitable to approach the question from a wider point of view; to trace the rise of Greek as a part of liberal education historically; to examine whether it satisfies modern requirements, and to examine whether, in the evolution of studies, it is likely to retain its position.

We may consider that Greek was very little studied in the middle ages. Dante probably knew nothing of it. Aristotle—"il primo di color che sanno," "the chief of those who know"—was read by the schoolmen in a Latin version of an Arabic translation of the Greek original. The study of Greek did not become general until after the capture of Constantinople by the

Turks in 1453. The second Renaissance was deeply affected by it; but it had little or no influence on the first. The idea of mediæval education was to be encyclopædic. The education of the middle ages was based on the seven years' course—the Trivium and Quadrivium—which was supposed to contain all that was necessary for human beings to know.

Gram loquitur, Dia vera docet, Rhe verba colorat,
Mus canit, ar numerat Geo ponderat As colit astra.

The seven liberal arts were grammar, dialectic or logic, rhetoric, music, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy. If the study of Greek might be held to be connected with the three first, the preliminary or trivial studies, it certainly could have nothing to do with the four last, the higher exercises of the more mature mind. The study of Greek inaugurated by the second Renaissance, and the more thorough study of Latin which accompanied it, caused great enthusiasm throughout the civilised world. The discoveries in history and antiquities, and the gradual elucidation of difficult passages in the classical authors, were only comparable to the scientific discoveries of the present-day. A new reading or a new version spread like wildfire through Europe, and reverberated through the whole body of learned people. Hence the humanities, as they were called, not only fascinated by their intrinsic value, but appealed to that love of excitement and notoriety which will always deeply sway the human heart. Even in the Catholic Church there was a pagan revival which had no small share in bringing about the Reformation. Thus when the Reformation broke with the old learning, when the means and instruments of education, provided by a long series of pious benefactions, became inaccessible to Protestants, and it was necessary to found a new training for the new faith, Europe found itself chained to the car of the classics. The duty of organising secondary education for Protestants fell upon Melancthon, who, partly by natural temperament and partly by accident, gave more impulse to the ancient languages than to the other parts of the mediæval course which he designed to resuscitate. By these influences the study of Greek assumed a larger importance, even in the more enlightened parts of Europe, than it deserved for itself, or than was contemplated for it.

By the time that Ratich and Comenius appeared upon the

scene with their realistic teaching, the yoke of the humanities was so firmly fixed that it could not be shaken off. The Catholic reaction of the seventeenth century was not favourable to reform. The political troubles of the same epoch prevented energetic action in Protestant countries. The apathy of the eighteenth century succeeded to the rebellions of its predecessor, the wars of Napoleon again prevented improvement, and therefore it has not been until our own time that we have had leisure and opportunity to review our educational system, and to see whether it corresponds with the demands of the age in which we live.

If what I have said be true, the study of Greek cannot claim any special importance on the score either of antiquity or deliberate choice. Nor, indeed, has the study of language as such any great *prestige* to recommend it. The Greeks themselves, who were not a badly educated people, learned no other language but their own; their very name for foreigners implied that in their opinion they talked gibberish. The Romans learned Greek, but not so much as a linguistic exercise as for the sake of studying Greek literature. Horace advises his readers to pore over Greek examples night and day, as Lord Macaulay once advised two undergraduate nephews to steep themselves in Plato. Greek does not appear to have had much influence over the forms of Latin sentences. Cæsar, the greatest of all Latin writers, was purely Roman; Cicero, who has deeply affected every modern literary language except Icelandic, if that can be called a literary language, learnt his style we know not where; probably in Asia, certainly not at Athens. The Greeks derived their culture from the Egyptians; but it is more probable that the Egyptian priests knew Greek than that Greek travellers knew Egyptian. The universal study of Latin in the middle ages was quite as much for the purpose of providing a form of universal communication between scholars as for acquiring a literary style. Also, during a considerable portion of that period modern languages could scarcely be said to exist. The Greeks and the French have left us a splendid example of what may be effected by the study of the mother tongue, but that is of no value in determining the utility of learning an ancient tongue. Still I have no desire to minimise the great educational effect of the study of Greek.

No language compares with it as a vehicle for thought. If we cast our eye over the field of Greek literature, what a diversity lies before us. Each writer that has come down to us has his own distinct individuality, so that the Greek scholar writing the language does not simply write Greek, but imitates the diction of Homer or Plato or Thucydides, of Sophocles or of Herodotus. The language, besides being beautiful and musical in itself, full of variety and of diversity of tone, fits the mind of him who uses it as closely as a glove fits the hand. Lord Macaulay said in his later years that he never read Thucydides without a feeling of despair. The construction is often difficult, sometimes impossible. As we read we penetrate without difficulty into the subtle shades of meaning, but we cannot translate intelligibly without a long periphrasis. The exercise of making out an author of this kind gives strength and pliancy to the intellect, which could hardly be gained by reading any number of *Times* leading articles, admirably as they are composed. A similar effect is produced by tracking throughout their ramifications the subtle arguments of Plato's dialogues. I am myself under deep obligations to this kind of training. My master at school was very fond of reading Thucydides with me. I made it a point of honour never to learn the lesson, and when put on had to make out the sense on the spur of the moment. I adopted an ingenious device to gain time. My master was a very able man of well filled and discursive mind. At any provocation he would go off into talks on general subjects of a most stimulating and interesting kind and of different length. I therefore treated him as Meilanion treated Atalanta. Keeping my finger on the sentence which I had last construed I strained every effort to work ahead. If my tutor's discourse was coming to an end I dropped another apple, for I had got to know precisely how much each subject was good for, one, two, or three minutes. The valuable breathing space was utilised by me to the utmost, and in the end I gained far more by not having learned my lesson than I should ever have gained if I had prepared it. The modern plan is, I believe, to put up the crib before you, to compare alternately the crib with the original and the original with the crib, and to note whether the translator has done his work efficiently. If Greek were to disappear this training would be lost, but at present how few obtain it, and

how seldom is the study of Greek defended on the grounds which I have just advanced!

But the question is not whether Greek shall be reduced in our schools to the position of Hebrew, but whether it is to remain compulsory on all who proceed to a University education. To decide this we must take a survey of the present condition of knowledge. All education which is worth the name conduces to a definite end. But nowadays it would be difficult for a master to say at any given moment which particular end he is aiming at in the education of a particular boy. Our public-school education which gives the tone to all the rest has never been subjected to a thorough revision. We retain the old classical basis which was once an end in itself, and we add to it mathematics, modern languages, history, and science. We attempt to embrace everything and to surrender nothing. We do not even allow specialisation because in our schools questions of discipline, and even of society, are quite as pressing as questions of education. There arises, therefore, an internecine strife between these conflicting claims; each study gets what it can in the struggle; and as when thieves fall out good men come by their own, so, while masters are squabbling as to what they shall teach, athletics and amusements, which have a clear and simple end in view, and which always know their own minds, step in and occupy the field. Therefore, as Mr. Gladstone wrote of his own time, the most crying want in the education of the present day is to distinguish between what is principal and what is subordinate. Now, as has often been remarked, there are four main lines on which education may be based—the classical, the mathematical, the scientific, and the modern literary. This last has never been developed to the fulness of its power, but I believe that it is capable of very large extension. Leaving this latter alone, let us say a few words about the educational value of the three first. What effect do they severally produce upon the mind, regarding them as organs of thought? Science makes great pretensions for itself in the present day. Mr. Herbert Spencer has said that it is the only thing worth learning. It bases its claims partly on its intrinsic importance, partly on the stimulus it gives to the faculty of observation, but principally on the certainty of its conclusions. It claims to teach what is, to believe in nothing, to ask its

learners to believe in nothing which cannot be seen, weighed, and handled. Now, in this very certainty its weakness lies. In all the domains of human speculation, just as we become certain we become false. The mind of man is incapable of ascertaining absolute truth; all it can reach is a very high degree of probability. There is no reason to suppose that if the Creator should give an account of His own work it would correspond in any particular to what we imagined that we knew about it. Time and space have no real existence, but are merely limitations of our own minds; the law of gravity, the discovery of which is reckoned as a triumph of inductive reasoning, might be found to have quite another explanation. In the complicated affairs of life, in law and politics, in love and war, we have to proceed by probabilities; certainties are impossible to us. The same is, of course, true of religion. A mode of reasoning, therefore, which is based on certainty has not only a narrow scope, but it unfits us for the solution of those most important questions which can be decided by probability alone. A similar charge may with good reason be brought against mathematics. They teach accurate reasoning, but they do not, except in their highest branches, stimulate the imagination, or accustom the mind to that familiarity with probabilities which is after all the highest degree of certainty which the human mind is capable of acquiring. The great merit of classics is that their study does develop this habit of mind to a very great degree. Let me take two examples. A number of persons translate a passage of Shakespeare into Greek iambics. A competent scholar will have no hesitation in saying that one version is better than the other, and a consensus amongst competent scholars on this point would be found which would astonish anyone who was not familiar with these matters; yet these judges would not be able to assign reasons for their opinions which would satisfy the average mind, for instance a British jury. No reason could be given which would not break down under the cross-examination of any experienced counsel. Yet the opinion would be no less valid for that. It would be derived from an absolutely certain instinct, derived from a habit of weighing probabilities which had become a second nature. So also in a suggested emendation of a corrupt passage a practised scholar would be able to say that a particular reading must be the right one,

or perhaps more often that it could not possibly be the right one. Yet it would be difficult to explain in words precisely the reasons which determined this decision. It is this training of a careful and well-balanced judgment that gives to classical studies their special and peculiar value.

I should therefore be inclined to conclude that of the three curricula which I have mentioned, the scientific, the mathematical, and the classical, the last is by far the best if it is applied to a mind suited to it. It is not difficult to ascertain at an early age whether a boy is likely to turn out a scholar or not. The class of mind which attaches a value to language, and is capable of appreciating minute differences of style and idiom, is one which reveals itself by unmistakable signs. It is true that there is a school of educationists who think that all natural tendencies should be repressed, and that the presence of a special faculty is a reason rather for repressing, or, as it is called, correcting, it than for developing it. This I do not believe. Observation of growing minds has taught me long since that more time is gained, and the best results are produced, by training the mind in that direction to which nature points, and that the cultivation of one faculty is the best means of strengthening all the rest. But of this classical curriculum Greek is the most important part. Greek is not only more educative than Latin, but is much better suited to be learned by tender minds, Greek not only appeals to the mature intellect by its subtlety and refinement, but, by a certain childishness and simplicity, to the intelligence of a boy or girl. It is difficult in Latin to find any classical author which is really suited for beginners. On the other hand a child will take quite naturally to the *Odyssey*. The way of telling the story suits it, and there is a charm in the narrative which sounds like a fairy tale. Therefore I say fearlessly that if classical education is to be maintained, and if one of the two classical languages has to be sacrificed, I would rather it were Latin than Greek. Also there is great danger of the standard of classical education being seriously lowered by the sacrifice of Greek. When I had an opportunity, a good many years ago, of examining the education given by the French Government schools, I was horrified at the low standard then attained in the Greek language—and I may say

in the Latin also. Scholarship, as we understand it, was almost unknown in France and Italy, although it then held its own in Germany, which was indeed a model to other nations in this respect. In France, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, an agitation began against the study of Greek, similar to that which is now going on in England. The University of Paris was not strong enough to withstand the tide of popular opinion, and surrendered Greek as a compulsory subject. The Jesuits—a very powerful and independent teaching body—were able to keep to it, and the consequence was that the education of the Jesuits took a very high position in France, and left the University far behind. Indeed this had much to do with the influence which the Jesuit teaching had over the whole of Europe. You will have gathered from what I have said that I am strongly of opinion that Greek should continue to be an essential part of classical education as long as that education is preserved, and that to give it up would probably prove the deathblow of what is called scholarship in England, and would seriously tend to lower the whole standard of the higher culture.

I must now pass to another subject. I mentioned above that there appeared to me to be four possible curricula in these modern days—the classical, the mathematical, the scientific, and the modern literary. The last of these has yet to be created; but I believe that if it were properly developed it would be found to be in educative effect and instructive value in no way inferior to the other three. A serious attempt was once made to introduce it during the Second French Empire by Napoleon III. and his minister of education, M. Duruy. It went by the name of Enseignement Secondaire Spécial. But there were great difficulties in the way. First, books had to be written for it. It was then discovered that there were no competent teachers, and a normal school had to be founded to provide the necessary instructors. The scheme had got no further when the Second Empire broke up, although I believe that something has been done to carry it out by the present Republican Government. The central idea of such an education is that it should fit a man for the problems and the work of modern life; that it should not be scientific nor mathematical, nor should it be professional. It should deal as

classical education deals with that higher preparatory education which ought in every case to precede the professional or bread-winning training. A man disciplined in it would understand the best thought, the best literature, the best art of the day; he would be acquainted with the problems with which the world has to deal—political, social, and moral; he would be cosmopolitan in taste and culture; he would be at home in any civilised country, and his interest in the life which he had to lead and the environment in which he would move would not be depressed and overweighted with the burden of an exhausted erudition. There is nothing more remarkable than the general ignorance of classical scholars. It is difficult for them to put themselves in touch with the modern world. If you speak to them of politics they are apt to think that it is an animal in the Zoological Gardens. Grote was a politician before he was an historian, Gibbon acknowledges his obligations to his experience as a member of parliament, but Curtius, the German historian of Greece, is a mere scholar. He describes events by putting texts together, but he has no skill in animating events with the life of action. Heine visited Poland at the age of twenty-one, and wrote an account of that country which is said never to have been surpassed in truth and insight. This is what I should like any scholar trained on modern lines to be able to do. He should have the linguistic facility of a Russian, the political understanding of an American, the erudition of a German, and the common-sense and sound judgment of an Englishman. Nothing should be thrown away in his education. Nothing should be regretted or thought better of when forgotten. He should not begin with a laborious scaffolding of a dead past. He should proceed from the known to the unknown. He should study the past only to understand the present better. I would of course begin with languages. He should learn French, German, and Italian, as many English children learn them from their nurses or their governesses. But as soon as I could I would make him aim at a scholar's perfection. He should grind at grammar, and labour at translation and composition enough to satisfy the severest pedant. He should also be made to feel that the principal use of language is as a key to literature, that the power of mere speaking was a mere courier's gift, and that the worth of language lies in its giving approach to the thoughts of men. He

should know his Dante as well as a University scholar knows his *Poetæ Scenici*. He should have studied with diligence and enthusiasm Goethe and Schiller, Racine and Pascal. But the main training of his mind I would draw from history, and especially political history. After having taught history at the University for about the same length of time as I had previously taught classics at school, I found that every year I had a stronger belief in it as a means of the higher education. Setting aside those students who have a marked aptitude for moral or natural science, or who are born classical scholars—and these classes form a small proportion of the whole—I know of no study which produces such results as history, if only the history be properly taught. Even in the lower classes the frivolous boy is turned by it into a thoughtful man. The reason for this is not far to seek. It is essentially a manly study. The schoolboy coming to the University, if he takes to classics has merely to repeat the exercises of his childhood; if he takes to history he is plunged at once into those studies and those considerations on which the most mature men are accustomed to exercise their minds. History may, of course, by bad teaching be turned into a mere exercise of the memory. But if the political side is kept clearly in view and the student is made to trace events to their cause, to explain the present by the past, to distinguish in the records of ancient times what is permanent from what is temporary, what is essential from what is accidental, he must acquire a robustness of intellect which few other studies can give. It also calls out what I before described as the highest organon of thought—the power of balancing probabilities. In history there is no certainty either of prediction or of judgment, or even of the relation of facts. “Do not read history to me,” said Bolingbroke; “I know that must be false.” False it is, tried by the test of science; true in the highest sense if measured by that standard of probability which is the only criterion within the grasp of weak and fallible man.

This modern literary training, based on the highest use of language, culminating sometimes in history and sometimes in philosophy, will, I believe, be the training of the future, if in the future the highest intellectual training is to exist at all. Let us therefore begin it as well as we can. Science is claiming

every day a larger scope; she is spreading her influence far and wide over the land, extinguishing fancy, imagination, and belief, hardening the mind against those eternal voices which can only be heard in whispers. If we would protect mankind from a mental leprosy whose influence may last for centuries, we must call to our aid all the assistance which literature in its widest sense can give us. It will be obvious from what I have said that while I believe most strongly that Greek should continue to be an essential part of classical education wherever that is pursued, yet I think that literary education, of which classical education is a branch, cannot hold its own against the advancing tide of science unless it calls to its aid the literature and the literary thought of the modern world, and this can best be done by establishing a new kind of literary education in which not only Greek, but perhaps also Latin, has no place. I should, therefore, wish to see some substitute for Greek admitted at our Universities, but such a substitute as would ensure that it was given up not out of mere indolence or indifference to culture, but from the desire to pursue some other worthy object of study with effective industry. The substitute for it should be either a competent knowledge of French and German taken together, or of mathematics and science. I trust that what I have said, if it does not command assent, will at least suggest ample topics for discussion.